

## Poverty awareness training is eye opening

By Eileen DiCicco, MPFS Development Associate

True or false? The Oregon minimum wage is sufficient to provide for a family of four with two wage earners both working full-time positions.

False, said Sunny Hodges and Lori Beamer, representatives of CoActive Connections, a nonprofit organization whose goal is to help people understand poverty in order to effectively respond to those living in poverty.

According to WorkSource Oregon, (Prosperity Planner for Marion County) the average cost of housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care and miscellaneous expenses for a family of four is \$3,238 per month — a \$246 shortfall from a two-person, full-time minimum wage household income of \$2,992.

So what does one do to make up the difference? Cash in coins and pay an 8% or 9% fee, trade in bottles, sell jewelry and other personal belongings, return unused merchandise, sell your blood plasma, and take out pay day loans or title loans are among the common options, said Hodges.

Hodges knows what it's like to live in poverty. She remembers taking out short-term loans to make ends meet for her and her son — a \$200 loan ended up costing \$1,000 when all was said and done. But people living in poverty often resort to desperate measures.

People living in poverty are in “crisis” mode daily, said Beamer, who used food stamps briefly as a single mother. When in crisis, people make decisions that may be hard to understand for someone with financial and social resources that are readily available.

To help attendees at the April 6 workshop held at Marion-Polk Food Share understand the level of crisis people in poverty live with day in and day out, an exercise was conducted. Without giving the particulars away, let's just say the participants felt what it was like to compete for resources with varied skill levels and time pressure. Among the emotions the exercise evoked were competition, frustration, disappointment, failure, despair and more — all in about 5 minutes. It was powerful.

The catalyst for formation of CoActive Connections was the book, “See Poverty ... Be the Difference,” by renowned poverty expert Dr. Donna M. Beegle, Beamer said.

“Reading the book and seeing Donna present was a real education to me. This is not re-inventing the wheel. It is an authentic perspective on what it is like to live in poverty and will hopefully increase people’s understanding enough that there are new conversations and policies about how best to serve and support people in poverty with a socially sustainable approach,” Beamer said. “The goal is to get people out of poverty. People who are experiencing poverty do not have an opportunity to express their full potential. When people are not able to express their full potentials, communities suffer.”

The purpose of CoActive Connections, said Hodges, is to promote “more understanding, compassion and respect for those in poverty.” She noted that 530,000 Oregonians are living in poverty; 52,300 of those people live in Marion County and are counted among those who are food insecure.

The workshop was hosted by Women Ending Hunger, an MPFS auxiliary that is dedicated to “engage, empower and educate,” people in the fight against local hunger.

According to CoActive Connections, there are many things an individual may do to make a difference in the lives of those struggling with poverty. First off, don't make assumptions about people. Then, be a good listener, build personal relationships, be encouraging, and help connect people experiencing poverty to resources.

To learn more about CoActive Connections or to schedule a workshop, contact Lori Beamer at 503-910-6435 or e-mail [lori@coactiveconnections.net](mailto:lori@coactiveconnections.net).